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Synecdoches and Symbols: Fictional Performances of *King Lear*

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Abstract

A number of narratives in film, television and popular fiction feature central characters who watch or perform in a fictional production of King Lear. Shakespeare's text itself can be represented only synecdochally in such narratives, using key scenes and speeches to represent the play as a whole; this article examines the moments that are most frequently chosen. King Lear generally functions symbolically in these narratives, echoing some of the themes of the text in which it has been embedded: these tend to include old age, parent-child relationships, memory and mental decline, human cruelty, the frailty of the human body, and the indifference or inhospitality of the natural world. Intriguingly, fictional performances of King Lear are often also catalysts for some form of reconciliation or communal renewal in their frame narratives. This article considers the fictional stagings of King Lear in Centennial (1979), The Dresser (1980, 1983, 2015), The King is Alive (2000), Slings and Arrows (2006), A Bunch of Amateurs (2008) and Station Eleven (2014) in order to explore the ways in which film, television and popular fiction offer overlapping and contrasting distillations of the play.

Fictional performances of *King Lear* reveal a great deal about the way in which the play figures in the popular imagination. A number of narratives in film, television and popular fiction feature central characters who watch or perform in the play, and in each of these narratives, the play is, by necessity, reduced to a small number of synecdochal moments. The moments chosen to represent the play as a whole are generally symbolic of the play's function within the frame narrative. This article examines the representation of fictional stagings of *King Lear* in six narratives: *Centennial* (1979), *The Dresser* (1980, 1983, 2015), *The King is Alive* (2000), *Slings and Arrows* (2006), *A Bunch of Amateurs* (2008) and *Station Eleven* (2014). It compares the ways in which the play functions in each of these narratives as both synecdoche and symbol.

Centennial (1979)

Centennial provides the shortest of this article's embedded performances. Based on James A. Michener's 1974 novel, *Centennial* was an American television series telling the story of a fictional Colorado town. Its narrative spanned two hundred years and was told over twelve feature-length episodes. The eighth of these, 'The Storm', is set in the late nineteenth century, and intertwines three main stories: the elderly Levi Zendt (Gregory Harrison) comes back from a trip to his childhood home in Pennsylvania to his modern-day home in Centennial, where his wayward daughter Clemma

(Adrienne La Russa) has also recently returned; the cattle rancher Oliver Seccombe (Timothy Dalton) faces ruin when his embezzlement of funds is discovered by an accountant; and Mervin and Maude Wendell's (Anthony Zerbe and Lois Nettleton) theatrical troupe arrive in town, where they immediately fall under the suspicion of the local Sheriff (Brian Keith).¹ The three stories come together as the Wendells perform the final scene from *King Lear* in the Railway Arms hotel, while a storm brews outside. Michener's novel makes no mention of *King Lear*, recounting simply that the Wendells perform "a group of eleven scenes from Shakespeare, edited somewhat to fit the talents of the troupe" (the *Lear* scene is performed by a cast of three in the TV film).² Charles Larson's teleplay for the episode, however, uses *King Lear* to crystallise several of the episode's key motifs. Like many Westerns, the series depicts frontier life as dangerous and fragile, subject to sudden and cruel disruption by both the natural world and other human beings. As the episode opens, rule of law in Centennial is precarious in the aftermath of a violent conflict between the local cattle ranchers, farmers and shepherds. Seccombe, who had been behind much of this violence, is shown at one point standing alone in the vast landscape; in the next episode, his ruin will lead him to shoot himself in a similar location. When the storm blows in, it traps Seccombe in his house, and he is powerless to do anything as the blizzard kills off most of his cattle. One of his employees describes the scene of devastation outside as "like the end of the world"; Seccombe, realising the implications of the dead cattle, replies, "Maybe it *is* the end of the world". But if Seccombe's answer to a hostile environment is a ruthless individualism that ends in his ruin, the episode's other protagonist provides a contrasting solution. In a speech to his wife towards the end of the episode, Levi Zendt articulates the importance of accepting and supporting their difficult daughter Clemma, who has returned home following a failed marriage and a spell as a prostitute:

We've all been hurt out here, because it's been hard. We know what it is to hurt – to see others hurt. We care. The way you cared for me.

At the height of the storm, Clemma leaves town on a train; Zendt, chasing after her, is pulled under its wheels and killed.

***The Dresser* (1980)**

Ronald Harwood's play *The Dresser* (1980) takes place backstage during a performance of *King Lear*, and depicts the final hours of an ageing actor-manager known in the play only as 'Sir'.³ The hostile natural world of *Centennial* is replaced by a more human threat: *The Dresser* is set in a regional

¹ "The Storm", *Centennial*, dir. Harry Falk (NBC, 14 January 1979). All quotations transcribed from the TV film.

² James A. Michener, *Centennial* (London: Corgi Books, 1975), 773.

³ Ronald Harwood, *The Dresser* (Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1980).

English town during the Second World War, and much of it takes place during an air raid. Sir sees his performance as Lear as a sort of bulwark against the threat, “looking heavenward” as he shouts “Bomb, bomb, bomb us into oblivion if you dare, but each word I speak will be a shield against your savagery, each line I utter protection from your terror”.⁴ Over the play, Sir looks heavenward to address not just the Nazi pilots but also the spirit of Shakespeare,⁵ and other unnamed forces he sees as driving him mercilessly on: perhaps God, perhaps an uncaring universe, perhaps himself. Sir talks throughout the play of a “him” who is “a hard task-master”, but it is not initially clear whom he means.⁶ A speech towards the end of the play suggests an imaginary amalgamation of Lear and Sir himself.⁷

The dresser of the title is Norman, Sir’s devoted servant and companion of sixteen years who not only dresses his master but also attempts to manage and, when necessary, hide Sir’s mental decline. Sir is having difficulty remembering his lines, and has become increasingly prone to violent outbursts and unpredictable weeping. At the start of the play, he has just been hospitalised following a breakdown in a market square in which he started to undress and to rage incoherently – as Norman observes, “just like Lear in the storm scene”.⁸ Sir and Norman share a relationship rather like Lear and his Fool, spanning mutual affection and hostility: Norman is both mockingly outspoken and deeply servile, alternately encouraged and restrained from speaking out. “You overstep the mark, boy,” says Sir at one point, in an echo of Lear: “Don’t get above yourself”.⁹ Following Sir’s death, Norman’s final lines in the play are from the Fool’s song: “He that has and a little tiny wit, / With a hey, ho, the wind and the rain”.¹⁰

There are further Shakespearean parallels in the debates staged in the play over Sir’s agency. *The Dresser* depicts a trio of women in various sorts of love relationships with Sir: his wife, known only as “Her Ladyship”, who plays Cordelia and feels trapped by her husband’s dependence on her; his stage manager, Madge, who has harboured an unrequited love for him for many years; and Irene, an ambitious younger actress who aims to get closer to Sir, perhaps in order to further her career (she seems to be angling for the role of Cordelia) or perhaps because of a genuine admiration for him. The pattern inverts Shakespeare’s play to some extent: the two older women tell Sir the painful truth while the younger flatters him. Like Goneril and Regan, both Her Ladyship and Madge think Sir

⁴ Harwood 51.

⁵ Harwood 84.

⁶ Harwood 31.

⁷ Harwood 70.

⁸ Harwood 14.

⁹ Harwood 39.

¹⁰ Harwood 95; *King Lear*, 3.2.74-5. All quotations from *King Lear* are from the Arden Third Series edition.

is too ill to continue, and in one sense they are completely right: Sir is evidently losing his memory, repeatedly forgetting which play they are doing that night, and when he tries a line run of his first scene, he gets confused and reels off a string of lines from other Shakespeare plays. He freezes in the wings just before his first entrance, obliging the actors waiting for him onstage to ad-lib. But Sir wants to feel in control of his life, telling Her Ladyship, “I decide when I’m ready for the scrap-yard. Not you. I and no one else”.¹¹ Indeed, his performance turns out to be a triumph, prompting “Thunderous applause and cheers” from the audience at the end,¹² and the play’s film and television adaptations show it on screen, extending the excerpts given in the play-script to include Lear’s death speech. In the 1983 film, Albert Finney’s Sir plays Lear’s final moments with a powerful theatricality,¹³ while in 2015, Anthony Hopkins’s Sir is more cinematic and understated,¹⁴ but both are shown to move their observers in the wings and audience to tears. The performance seems, literally, to kill Sir: pronouncing himself “Terribly tired”, he dies in his dressing room at the end of the play.¹⁵

The King is Alive (2000)

Kristian Levring’s film *The King is Alive* (2000) provides a third example of a fictional performance of *King Lear* taking place in inhospitable surroundings – in this case, a remote part of an African desert.¹⁶ Ten Western passengers and their African driver become stranded in the desert when their bus runs out of fuel. They find shelter in a mostly abandoned mining settlement with one remaining inhabitant, the elderly Kanana (Peter Kubheka), who serves as the film’s narrator. One of the travellers, Jack (Miles Anderson), goes off to find help, leaving the others with some basic survival instructions and the recommendation that “above all, we stay positive, and we keep our spirits up”. As the days pass and the group await Jack’s return, it becomes clear that they are ill-suited to survival under these conditions, and Henry (David Bradley), a former actor, finds himself reminded of *King Lear*. Predicting that they will soon be fighting over water and the limited supply of food, he anticipates “some fantastic striptease act of basic human needs”, and concludes, with contempt, “Is man no more than this?” (3.4.101). He writes down *King Lear* from memory, and soon he is directing the rest of the group in a loose performance of the play in order to kill time as they wait to be rescued. The play actually becomes a means of avoiding the reality of their situation: when Jack fails to return within five days, the group follow his instructions and roll tyres into a mound in order to

¹¹ Harwood 25.

¹² Harwood 84.

¹³ *The Dresser*, dir. Peter Yates (1983).

¹⁴ *The Dresser*, dir. Richard Eyre (BBC, 31 October 2015).

¹⁵ Harwood 90.

¹⁶ *The King is Alive*, dir. Kristian Levring (2000). All quotations transcribed from the film.

create a smoke signal, none of them acknowledging the obvious implication that Jack has died somewhere in the desert. As Kanana's narrative voice-over puts it, "Words made them forget. For a while they went round and said words without talking to each other."

The veneer of civilization quickly breaks down as sexual tensions and power struggles emerge among the group, and the play becomes a site for these. Catherine (Romane Bohringer), having passed up the role of Cordelia, starts secretly to learn the lines when she becomes jealous of Henry's evident affection for her replacement, Gina (Jennifer Jason Leigh). Bullying patriarch Charles (David Calder) makes a deal with Gina that he will participate in the play only if she enters into a sexual relationship with him "till this madness ends". Liz (Janet McTeer) uses a scene in which Goneril kisses Edmund, played by the bus driver Moses (Vusi Kunene), to provoke her husband Ray (Bruce Davison). As a means of maintaining morale, the project is an unmitigated disaster. Its first Lear, Ashley (Brion James), collapses with illness from alcohol withdrawal; Gina soon follows, having been poisoned by Catherine's deliberate sabotage of the cans of carrots. Mad with jealousy, Ray wanders off into the desert, where he finds Jack's body, and returns to the group with the news. While the others are away burying Jack, Charles, having had his sexual and masculine pride wounded by Gina, kills her in a horrifically demeaning way before hanging himself. Rescue arrives as the group react to the deaths by reciting fragments from the play.

Slings and Arrows (2006)

Shakespeare's play is a rather more benign force in Season 3 of the Canadian TV series *Slings and Arrows* (2006).¹⁷ Written by actors Susan Coyne, Bob Martin and Mark McKinney, *Slings and Arrows* is set at the fictional New Burbage Festival Theatre – a thinly-veiled, partly satirical, but ultimately affectionate portrait of the Stratford Festival. Season 3 follows the format of the previous two by depicting the troubled rehearsal process and eventual performance of a Shakespearean production at the Festival, in this case *King Lear*. Following the Broadway success of Season 2's *Macbeth*, the Festival is inundated with actors who want to play Lear, and though its manager Richard Smith-Jones (McKinney) is keen to cast a Canadian celebrity (at one point, he asks excitedly if William Shatner is going to do it), the artistic director, Geoffrey Tennant (Paul Gross), opts for the elderly classical actor Charles Kingman (played by real-life Stratford veteran William Hutt). Charles proves difficult to work with, bullying the actors of Goneril (Barbara, played by Janet Bailey), Regan (Ellen, played by Martha Burns), and especially Cordelia (Sophie, played by Sarah Polley), and repeatedly criticising their acting. When Geoffrey asks Charles to give the rest of the company "time to catch up", Charles

¹⁷ *Slings and Arrows*, Season 3, dir. Peter Wellington (Movie Central, 24 July – 28 August 2006). All quotations transcribed from the DVD.

reveals that his impatience is due to the fact that he has terminal cancer and is in the last few months of his life. Charles persuades Geoffrey to keep his illness secret so that he can play Lear – his life’s ambition – and Geoffrey agrees. Soon, Geoffrey discovers that Charles is managing his pain by injecting heroin, and becomes complicit not only in keeping Charles’s drug use secret too, but also in helping Charles to administer the drug. Like Sir in *The Dresser*, Charles becomes muddled and forgetful, at one point losing his lines during a preview performance. Richard has faith in the narrative cliché of the genre, assuring the Festival administrator Anna (Coyne) that “things come together at the last minute in theatre”, but *Slings and Arrows* repeatedly frustrates this expectation. Opening night is a failure: the start is delayed as Charles has not shown up, having had a fall at his home, and Geoffrey finally decides to cancel. *Lear* is moved into the 150-seat studio theatre to make room for a tacky musical in the main house, and Charles relapses on the production’s rescheduled opening night, cursing those around him using Lear’s lines. The actors onstage wait for his entrance, in another echo of *The Dresser*, but unlike in Harwood’s play, success remains elusive – Charles is unable to go on, and the production is cancelled for good. When Geoffrey’s knowledge of Charles’s condition comes to light, the insurance company demands his resignation. In order to fulfil Charles’s ambition to play Lear, the company reconvenes for a single performance in a local church hall, risking their Festival contracts by doing so. Following a final, successful performance, Charles dies – like Sir – in his dressing room.

A Bunch of Amateurs (2008)

Like *Slings and Arrows*, Andy Cadiff’s comic film *A Bunch of Amateurs* (2008) makes a rather sentimental use of Shakespeare’s play as the centrepiece of a tale about redemption and reconciliation.¹⁸ Jefferson Steel (Burt Reynolds) is a washed-up Hollywood action star. His latest film, *Ultimate Finality 4*, has been a failure and he is repeatedly mistaken for other, more famous stars (he is, however, famous enough to warrant a live press conference when he decides to play King Lear, and to make the front pages of the British tabloid press, so the film is a little inconsistent in this respect). His agent offers him the chance to play Lear, “the best part there is”, in “Stratford” – it will, his agent assures him, put Jefferson “back on the map”. What Jefferson does not realise is that he has not been booked by the Royal Shakespeare Company but by a penniless amateur theatre group in the village of Stratford St John, Suffolk. Their theatre, which their director Dorothy (Samantha Bond) describes as “the heart of our community”, is in danger of being closed down, but Jefferson’s high profile will, they hope, attract enough income to save it. Jefferson resents the misunderstanding and makes numerous unreasonable demands, falling out with the group’s jealous

¹⁸ *A Bunch of Amateurs*, dir. Andy Cardiff (2008). All quotations transcribed from the film.

leading man and would-be Lear, Nigel (Derek Jacobi). A series of events leads him to be wrongly accused of having an affair with the wife of the production's sponsor, leading the whole project to collapse. In a fit of anger, misunderstood and misrepresented by his fellow actors, his daughter and the press, Jefferson drives Dorothy's mobile library off into the wilds of Suffolk. A storm breaks as he drives, and he crashes into the side of the road when he swerves to avoid a collision. Catching sight of his bloodied reflection in the wing mirror, he punches it before turning his rage onto the elements using Lear's lines from 3.2. Dorothy finds him and embraces him, replying to his claim that he is "a man more sinned against than sinning" with "I know". Following this, the group overcome their difficulties and put on a well-received show, and Jefferson's fame and money allow it to transfer to London's Old Vic Theatre.

Station Eleven (2014)

This article's final example is Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*, a novel that interweaves narratives from several different timelines to tell the stories of a range of characters over the decades before, during and after an almost complete collapse of human civilization.¹⁹ The novel's opening moments describe a performance of *King Lear* in modern-day Toronto. The production's Lear is Arthur Leander, a Hollywood star who, like Jefferson Steel, is "primarily a film actor" and not "as famous as he had been"; like Charles Kingman, he has "waited all [his] life" to play Lear, though he is only 51 years old.²⁰ As the chapter opens, Arthur is having trouble with his motor functions and memory, delivering his lines in the wrong order and stumbling into the scenery. Jeevan, a trainee paramedic in the audience, recognises that Arthur is having a heart attack, and rises to help. Jeevan sees the child Kirsten, the adult version of whom will become one of the novel's protagonists, watching from the wings as Arthur dies.

The same night, Toronto is hit by the "Georgia Flu", a global pandemic that goes on to kill 99% of the world's population. Chapter 6 is "an incomplete list" of the things that become impossible following the collapse, and its refrain of "no more" ("No more countries, all borders unmanned... No more fire departments, no more police...") echoes the repeated and prominent use of the same two-word phrase throughout *King Lear*.²¹ Chapter 7 flashes forward twenty years, and we are introduced to a touring troupe of actors and musicians called the Travelling Symphony, who are traversing unknown territory in post-collapse North America and running lines from the same scene in *King Lear*. The adult Kirsten is among them, playing Cordelia in the production, and her friend August is learning the

¹⁹ Emily St John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (London: Picador, 2014).

²⁰ Mandel 8, 9.

²¹ Mandel 31.

role of Edgar.²² We never actually see the Travelling Symphony play their *King Lear* – they decide against it in favour of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when the town they arrive in turns out to be too “depressing”²³ – but later in the novel another character reads a “rapturous write-up” of the production in one of the first post-collapse newspapers.²⁴

Synecdoches and symbols

What kinds of versions of *King Lear*, then, emerge from these narratives? Two characters offer helpful summaries of the plot – Liz in *The King is Alive*, and Charles in *Slings and Arrows*. In both cases, they tell the story of an old man who wants to divide up his kingdom according to which of his daughters says she loves him the most, though whereas Liz’s summary ends there (“That’s it... Nobody has to fall in love, and everybody gets to die in the end”), Charles’s encompasses a slightly more optimistic note as he describes Lear’s happiness at being reconciled with Cordelia. The play is performed before a paying audience in all but one of the narratives. The design of these productions is remarkably consistent across *Centennial*, the film and television versions of *The Dresser*, *Slings and Arrows*, and *A Bunch of Amateurs*: the characters wear pseudo-medieval costumes, Lear himself in long robes with white hair and a beard (often a fake one), while the set is generally some combination of trees, curtains and scenery painted to look like stone. Arthur’s production of *King Lear* in *Station Eleven* is the main outlier in terms of its style of staging, partly because it is based on a real production (James Lapine’s in New York, 2007), and it includes a number of innovative touches – a pre-show sequence, hallucinations of Lear’s daughters as children, snow falling during Lear’s mad scene. While the acting in *Centennial* and the 1983 film of *The Dresser* is deliberately stagey and old-fashioned, the 2015 *The Dresser*, *Slings and Arrows*, *A Bunch of Amateurs* and at times *The King is Alive* tend to equate acting success with psychological realism. Two adaptations feature an actress playing Goneril who thinks in Stanislavskian terms: Liz in *The King is Alive* wants to know “who she [Goneril] is and where she comes from”, while Barbara in *Slings and Arrows* argues with Geoffrey about Goneril’s “arc”. Towards the climax of *A Bunch of Amateurs*, Jefferson departs from the stately acting style the troupe has previously established in favour of Method-style mumbling, and close-ups show characters expressing their own emotions through those of their characters in both versions of *The Dresser*, *The King is Alive*, *Slings and Arrows*, and *A Bunch of Amateurs*. Though many of these instances would seem to indicate triumphs of televisual and cinematic modes of acting, TV and film also feature in these narratives in direct opposition to live Shakespearean performance: Jefferson Steel and Arthur Leander both leave what is constructed as the superficiality of Hollywood for the

²² Mandel 35-6.

²³ Mandel 44

²⁴ Mandel 263.

integrity and immediacy of the stage, while in *Slings and Arrows*, Ellen abandons a lucrative TV contract in order to return to the theatre, forfeiting her house in the process. In a symbolic gesture in *The King is Alive*, Henry writes his memorial reconstruction of *King Lear* on the backs of the pages of a Hollywood screenplay he happens to have with him.

I annotated a copy of *King Lear* with every citation of the play in each of these adaptations, counting the number of separate instances that each passage was seen being performed, rehearsed, recited, or quoted visually.²⁵ The Appendix gives an overview of the results. Of the top five most frequently-used passages, four concern Lear and his daughters: the love-test, Cordelia's banishment, Lear's reunion with her, and his entrance with her body. The top spot belongs to the opening moments of 3.2's storm scene (due in part to a high number of visual quotations). The joint sixth spot is shared by a moment in 3.4's storm scene ("Is man no more than this? ... Off, off, you lendings", ll. 101-106) and Lear's mad scene in 4.6, the latter almost entirely because of its repeated use in *Station Eleven*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the need in all of these narratives to condense the play, the Gloucester sub-plot is almost entirely absent, and when it does appear, it is often as a throwaway gag.²⁶

According to these adaptations, then, the storm is *King Lear*'s most potent synecdoche. Across the six adaptations, there are eight separate performances, rehearsals or quotations of the first 24 lines of 3.2 ("Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks...", ll. 1-24), another eight of other lines from the scene, and another six of moments from the next part of the storm sequence in 3.4.²⁷ There are six further visual quotations, in which the viewer or reader is shown an actual storm; in three such instances, we see a lone elderly man caught up in that storm. Many of these storms feature in their respective narratives as symbols of a hostile or indifferent universe: the blizzard in *Centennial*, the sandstorm towards the end of *The King is Alive*, and the snowstorm that coincides with the arrival of the

²⁵ I decided against counting indirect allusions, since these are hard to define with any clarity and can easily be missed. In order to avoid biasing the findings towards *The Dresser*, I counted the stage, film and television versions of *The Dresser* as a single text, so that where a quotation occurs in more than one of these versions I counted it only once. It should be noted that the film and television adaptations of 1983 and 2015 contain a great deal of material from *King Lear* that is not quoted in Harwood's 1980 play. I counted the scene run-throughs in *The King is Alive* as rehearsals rather than performances, though I admit the distinction is arbitrary, since the characters are not rehearsing for a "final" performance, and their whole process is watched by an audience of one, in the form of Kanana.

²⁶ In a comic scene in *Slings and Arrows*, the Festival's special effects team get carried away as they pitch cartoonishly gory methods of staging Gloucester's blinding ("My first idea is spoons, right?"). The actors playing Cornwall and Gloucester get similarly excited in *A Bunch of Amateurs*, trying out pickled onions and then joke shop eyes-on-springs. Paul (Aaron Abrams), one of the featured characters in Season 3 of *Slings and Arrows*, plays Edgar in the New Burbage Festival production, but tellingly, the viewer sees nothing of his performance until the final episode.

²⁷ I have not included in this list *Slings and Arrows*' tongue-in-cheek Season 3 theme song, 'It's Nice to Take a Walk in the Rain' – a Pythonesque ditty advising "a stomp through a storm" whenever "fate treats you bad".

Georgia Flu in *Station Eleven*. Other storms are constructed more as metaphors for their characters' turbulent minds: "Lear is the storm," says Charles in *Slings and Arrows*, echoing Sir's "I am the storm!" from *The Dresser*.²⁸ But the storm is also used as a locus of human care and reconciliation. Both Dorothy in *A Bunch of Amateurs* and Geoffrey in *Slings and Arrows* chase their respective Lears into a thunderstorm, combining the roles of the Fool and Kent (Dorothy and Geoffrey's parts in the fictional productions) as they comfort and protect their Lear-figures and lead them back to safety. In *Station Eleven*, Mandel uses storm imagery to symbolise the interconnectedness of her characters: in Chapter 2 the child Kirsten is given a paperweight, "a lump of glass with a storm cloud trapped inside", which as the novel continues we discover has already passed through the hands of several of its other protagonists (Miranda, Clark, and Arthur).²⁹

All of these narratives feature at least one character who is closely identified with Lear himself. Several of these characters use *King Lear* to reflect upon their relationships with their own children. *Station Eleven* returns to the night of Arthur's death, told this time from his own perspective, in its antepenultimate chapter, when we learn that Arthur has started to cast off his worldly possessions and give away his fortune,³⁰ and that he is using his time onstage during the production's pre-show sequence to reflect upon his past, especially on his distant relationship with his son Tyler.³¹ In *The King is Alive*, we discover that Henry is also the father of an estranged child when Catherine listens to a message he has recorded on his Dictaphone:

These past days, I've been thinking of you more and more. I should've done that a long time ago. ... I'm trying to imagine your life.

When Ashley becomes ill, Henry takes over as Lear. He fights back tears as he performs Cordelia's banishment, and by the time he says "I loved her most, and thought to set my rest / On her kind nursery" (1.1.124-5), it has evidently become clear to the whole group that he is using the play to work through his own regrets. He forms a kind of paternal bond with Gina early on in the film, and when she dies at the end, he weeps over her body, Lear-like, bending down to try to hear her breath. As he cradles her body, the line between fiction and reality breaks down, and he expresses his grief for Gina, and his anger at the survivors, entirely through Lear's words: "A plague upon you, murderers, traitors all; / I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever" (5.3.267-8).

²⁸ Harwood 64.

²⁹ Mandel 15.

³⁰ Mandel 322-3.

³¹ Mandel 325-8.

Jefferson's relationship with his daughter Amanda (Camilla Arfwedson) is likewise at the heart of *A Bunch of Amateurs*. They fall out in its opening moments, following his disapproval of a fringe theatre production in which she is performing: "I've given you everything I know how to give you," he says to her, "and you just throw it back in my face". They remain estranged for much of the film, though Jefferson faces constant painful reminders of their argument: a journalist reports that Amanda has called him "perfect casting" for Lear, since the character is "an arrogant egomaniac and a lousy father all rolled into one", and as Jefferson is learning his lines, he picks up a photograph of his daughter and seems moved when he says the words, "We'll no more meet, no more see one another. / But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter" (2.4.217-18). When the actress playing Cordelia has a severe allergic reaction during the first performance, Dorothy calls Amanda to fly over and replace her, and Jefferson is reunited with his daughter using the words (more or less) of *King Lear*:

AMANDA. O my dear father, restoration hang
Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss
Repair those violent harms that my two sisters
Have in thy reverence made!

JEFFERSON. I don't know what to say.

DOROTHY. Oh, I think you do.

JEFFERSON. Pray, do not mock me, for I am a very foolish, fond old man; and laugh at me,
for as I am a man, I think this lady to be my child.

AMANDA. And so I am.

(Adapted from 4.7.26-9, 59-70)

Jefferson's reply is not the next speech in the play, nor is it at all accurately delivered, but this does not really matter for the film's narrative: what is important is that Shakespeare's play becomes the catalyst for the reconciliation between father and daughter. This scene segues straight to the final performances in the village theatre and then at the Old Vic, where the *Lear* excerpts focus exclusively on Lear and Cordelia's reunion and deaths.

Several of the *Lear* figures in these narratives are capricious and controlling, even abusive, and the adaptations explore a range of ideas about their behaviour. *The King is Alive* provides an almost forensic examination of Charles's destructive self-importance and its devastating consequences. In *A Bunch of Amateurs*, Jefferson learns humility before it is too late. *Slings and Arrows* seems ultimately

to forgive Charles's bullying of his fellow actors on the basis of his illness, encouraging the viewer to share Geoffrey's charitable view of him rather than Barbara, Ellen and Sophie's impatience. Indeed, all three women forgive Charles and participate in his farewell performance at the end of the series, while a close-up on Geoffrey during the same performance suggests that he shares Kent's admiration for Charles's Lear-like "authority" (Kent, we are told, is "the moral centre of the play", and certainly Geoffrey plays a Kent-like role in protecting and caring for Charles). *The Dresser* is more ambiguous. Sir attempts to justify his short temper and stubbornness as "the penalties of aspiration and ambition... so awful are they to bear that others, not so cursed, must suffer in their presence".³² But the play also directs our attention towards that suffering in its presentation of Her Ladyship, Madge, and Norman himself; Her Ladyship argues that Sir's sense of his "duty" to his art is a convenient mask for his vanity and self-interest, while the play's climax focuses on Norman's fury at not being mentioned in the dedication to Sir's autobiography, despite his sixteen years of selfless companionship (he notes that Madge is not mentioned either).

Most of the adaptations explore ageing and memory. Sir, Charles Kingman and Arthur Leander each have trouble remembering their lines, their minds deteriorating due to their physical ailments; all three of them soon die of their conditions. Coming to terms with ageing is a motif throughout Season 3 of *Slings and Arrows*: Ellen (Martha Burns) tells Geoffrey that they need to accept they are getting older; Barbara (Janet Bailey) is going through the menopause; Richard (Mark McKinney) goes through something of a mid-life crisis; Frank (Michael Polley) and Cyril (Graham Harley), the Festival's chorus-like veteran actors, provide a string of vignettes on the subject. Frank is slowly losing his hearing; he reads an obituary of a fellow actor in the newspaper, and wonders aloud whether he'll ever get to play Lear; comforting Sophie over drinks in the pub, he reflects, first gaily and then sadly, on the importance of being able to say he has "had a life", the past tense becoming more poignant on the second utterance. In *Centennial*, a concern with ageing is inherent in the series format, which shows many of its central characters progressing over the episodes from young adulthood to old age (making heavy and not always convincing use of make-up in order to do so). The performance of *King Lear* in 'The Storm' signifies primarily in these terms. The excerpt shown begins with Lear carrying the dead Cordelia, and ends with the play's final speech, condensing the exchange into a few lines and conflating Kent, Edgar and Albany into a single character, played by the Wendells' young son. By this point in the episode, numerous characters have recalled events that were depicted earlier in the series, with accompanying flashbacks. Prominent among these have been Zendt's memories of his first wife Elly, who died from a rattlesnake bite in the third episode,

³² Harwood 69.

‘The Wagon and the Elephant’. Lear’s mourning over the dead Cordelia thus serves to echo Zendt’s grief for his long-dead first wife, especially when, in the closing moments of the performance, the boy laments that “the oldest hath borne most” (5.3.324), and the camera cuts to a close-up of Zendt’s reaction. With a child playing the Kent/Edgar/Albany figure, the next part of the line, “we that are young”, invites the viewer to notice the antithesis of old and young. In this context, like the series itself, *King Lear* becomes a story about the passage of time, the handing over of one generation to the next. The narrative structure of *Station Eleven* does something similar, following some of its characters over several decades of their lives in a non-linear fashion: as the book closes, Arthur, like Zendt, uses *King Lear* to remember happier times and achieve a kind of peace.

Many of these narratives show elderly people, usually men, reflecting on the extent to which their lives have really mattered. This is particularly evident in *The Dresser*, where Sir’s dying words – ostensibly referring to the title of his autobiography – are “*My Life* will have to do”.³³ Richard Eyre’s 2015 television adaptation makes ingenious use of a sequence that was cut from the 1983 film, using a long speech by the elderly actor Geoffrey for a moment of tragic recognition. Geoffrey, an understudy, has just gone on for the first time as the Fool, a role he describes as “by far the most important part I’ve ever played in Shakespeare”.³⁴ Explaining that the experience has given him “the taste for more”, Geoffrey makes a rambling speech about his long, modest and unambitious life, asking “to be considered for better parts” and casually mentioning that his grandson has been taken prisoner in Tripoli.³⁵ In Eyre’s adaptation, Geoffrey is played by Edward Fox, the same actor who had played the role of the young actor Oxenby in the 1983 film. Fox is unrecognisable in Geoffrey’s Fool make-up when the character first appears, meaning that for some viewers, the character’s final scene in Sir’s dressing room is the first moment that he becomes recognisable as the actor from the earlier film, 32 years on. It is a moment of another sort of recognition for Sir, who in Anthony Hopkins’s performance seems profoundly moved by Geoffrey’s speech, a tear falling down his cheek as he whispers, “Fine fellow”.³⁶ It functions, perhaps, as an understated version of Lear’s own moment of *anagnorisis*: “Is man no more than this?” (3.4.101).

For at least some of the characters in each of these narratives, the act of performing *King Lear* serves “a higher purpose”. This phrase comes from *Slings and Arrows*, when Geoffrey and his ghostly mentor Oliver (Stephen Ouimette) realise as they watch the final performance from the wings that “this isn’t about us”. *Slings and Arrows*’ benevolent reading of Shakespeare’s play becomes explicit

³³ Harwood 92.

³⁴ Harwood 86.

³⁵ Harwood 87-8.

³⁶ Harwood 88.

early on, when Charles's interpretation of the storm sequence persuades Geoffrey to cast him. Lear, explains Charles, "stripped of everything, riches, loyalties, standing naked on the heath", suddenly notices his Fool, "standing there, shivering in the cold – and something stirs". "In boy, go first" (3.4.26), is, says Charles, an "incredible thing for a king to say", and the thought that leads Lear to turn back into the storm to pray for the "Poor naked wretches" of his kingdom (3.4.28):

He makes the connection between his own suffering, and the suffering of others. He's losing his mind, but on the way, he's finding his heart.

The "Poor naked wretches" speech resurfaces in Episode 5, when *Lear* has just been downgraded to the studio theatre and Charles is shown rehearsing the speech, to Geoffrey's approval. Geoffrey has just explained to the cast that it is only when Lear loses everything that he discovers his dignity, and this seems to be the meaning that Coyne, Martin and McKinney want to emphasise. The series ends with most of the protagonists losing their jobs, as the running of the Festival is taken over by the foolish Richard and the pretentious Darren Nicholls (Don McKellar). As the other characters band together to perform the play for "a higher purpose" – Charles, humanity, artistic integrity – the implication seems to be that they find both their "hearts" and their dignity.

Station Eleven explores a similarly humanist understanding of theatre's value. On the one hand, the novel follows *The King is Alive* in co-opting *King Lear* into a narrative about a descent into barbarity. We hear about, but do not see, "the blood-drenched years following the collapse"³⁷ – Kirsten herself, a child at the time, cannot recall anything of her first year on the road, having blocked out the memories. But Mandel eschews the horror of comparable post-apocalyptic narratives in order to focus on a period twenty years after the event, in which civilization is finally starting to re-establish itself. Lawlessness is on the wane, newspapers are being printed, and at the very end of the novel, we discover that someone has been able to generate electricity again. Kirsten and August end up at "the Museum of Civilization", a museum and settlement that has been set up in an old airport, and in this context, the Travelling Symphony's Shakespearean performances serve as signifiers of something more hopeful than *The King is Alive's* bleak view of human nature. The Travelling Symphony's motto is "Because survival is insufficient",³⁸ and though at times its members see their project as "a difficult and dangerous way to survive and hardly worth it", at others, they see it as "noble".³⁹ The book's optimistic ending seems to endorse the latter view, though Mandel also hints at a rather more mundane need: "There were moments around campfires when someone would say

³⁷ Mandel 48.

³⁸ Mandel 58.

³⁹ Mandel 119.

something invigorating about the importance of art, and everyone would find it easier to sleep that night".⁴⁰

The Dresser is similarly ambivalent. When Her Ladyship insists that "One less Lear in the world won't make any difference", Norman replies, "Sir always believes it will".⁴¹ In his curtain speech, Sir asserts that "Our civilization is under threat from the forces of darkness, and we, humble actors, do all in our power to fight as soldiers on the side of right in the great battle".⁴² But while Sir may be convinced that he is serving civilization, the audience is left room for doubt: he is, after all, conceited, self-centred, and willing to sacrifice the happiness of those around him in order to pursue his vocation. Peter Yates's 1983 film undercuts Sir's curtain speech by prefacing it with a new sequence, much earlier in the film, when Sir hubristically offers complimentary tickets to an elderly man whose home has just been destroyed in an air raid. "I trust you will find comfort there," he says complacently, as the man stares past him towards the wreckage of his home. The sequence lends the curtain speech, when it comes, a rather hollow feel.

The King is Alive and, surprisingly, *Centennial* are more overtly sceptical about theatre's "higher purpose". The singular failure of the performance of *King Lear* in *The King is Alive* to maintain any sense of civilization has already been discussed. *Centennial*, on the other hand, might be expected to take a similar line to that of the Travelling Symphony: over the closing moments of 'The Storm', for example, we hear the voice of Levi Zendt asserting that though "we can't choose the times we live in", we can "try to change the way they are, a little, while we're here". But in fact the performance of *King Lear* in *Centennial* does little to contribute towards any sort of civilized progress. It soon transpires that the Wendells are con artists, and their performance of *King Lear* gives them the necessary cultural capital to begin their extortion of the local pastor, Reverend Holly. Believing that the Wendells "provide Centennial with a service that it badly needs", Holly offers them accommodation in his family's second home; the Wendells then trick him into a compromising situation which they use in order to blackmail him.

These *King Lears*, then, offer a range of readings of the play. They are all broadly humanist: they tend to construct the play as a drama about old age, parenthood, memory and the natural world, and are more concerned with family politics than they are with statecraft. Many of them explore the precariousness of civilization – but where some suggest that the play is about its collapse, others construct it as a means of maintaining or re-establishing civilization. It is tempting to conclude that

⁴⁰ Mandel 119.

⁴¹ Harwood 19.

⁴² Harwood 84.

such stories of community, renewal and reconciliation are an attempt to soften the brutality of the play.

Appendix

Top nine passages by total number of instances:

Passage	Instances
3.2.1-24 ("Blow, winds...")	14
1.1.33-82 (Love test up until Cordelia's answer)	13
1.1.83-121 and 225-36 (Cordelia's answer and banishment)	8
4.7.26-75 (Lear and Cordelia's reunion)	6
5.3.255-61 ("Howl, howl, howl, howl")	6
4.6.80-132 (Lear crowned with wild flowers)	5
3.4.101-7 ("Is man no more than this? ... Off, off, you lendings")	5
5.3.304-9 (Lear's final speech and death)	4
5.3.322-5 (Final speech)	4

Top ten most performed passages:

Passage	Instances
1.1.33-82 (Love test up until Cordelia's answer)	4
5.3.255-61 ("Howl, howl, howl, howl")	4
5.3.322-5 (Final speech)	4
1.1.1-32 (Kent, Gloucester, Edmund)	3
5.3.304-9 (Lear's final speech and death)	3
3.2.1-24 ("Blow, winds...")	2
4.6.80-132 (Lear crowned with wild flowers)	2
4.7.26-75 (Lear and Cordelia's reunion)	2

5.3.269-71 ("I might have saved her; now she's gone for ever")	2
5.3.311, 315 and 320-1 (Kent's response to Lear's death)	2

Top six most rehearsed passages:

Passage	Instances
1.1.33-82 (Love test up until Cordelia's answer)	5
1.1.83-121 and 225-36 (Cordelia's answer and banishment)	3
3.2.1-24 ("Blow, winds...")	2
4.7.26-75 (Lear and Cordelia's reunion)	2
1.1.121-143 (Kent's banishment)	2
3.7.69 and 84 (Gloucester's blinding)	2

Top eleven most recited passages:

Passage	Instances
1.1.83-121 and 225-36 (Cordelia's answer and banishment)	5
1.1.33-82 (Love test up until Cordelia's answer)	4
3.2.1-24 ("Blow, winds...")	4
4.7.26-75 (Lear and Cordelia's reunion)	2
4.6.80-132 (Lear crowned with wild flowers)	2
5.3.255-61 ("Howl, howl, howl, howl")	2
3.2.72-3 ("Poor fool and knave")	2

3.2.74-7 (Fool's song)	2
1.2 (Gloucester, Edmund, Edgar)	2
3.2.60-67 (Kent)	2
3.4.77 ("This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen")	2

Scenes not represented in any of the adaptations:

- 1.5 (Lear and Fool)
- 2.1 (Edmund, Edgar, Gloucester, Cornwall, Regan)
- 2.3 (Edgar)
- 2.4 (Lear, Fool, Kent, Cornwall, Regan)
- 3.3 (Gloucester and Edmund)
- 3.5 (Cornwall, Edmund)
- 3.6 (mock trial)
- 4.3 (Kent and Gentleman)
- 4.5 (Regan and Oswald)
- 5.1 (Edmund, Regan, Goneril, Albany)
- 5.2 (Edmund, Gloucester)